Georgia Archive

Volume 4 | Number 1 Article 7

January 1976

Massive Collections: From Warehouse to Reading Room

Lydia Lucas
Minnesota Historical Society

MASSIVE COLLECTIONS FROM WAREHOUSE TO READING ROOM

Lydia Lucas

Coping with large collections is one of the major challenges facing the modern archivist. He wants to make all records in his care as useable for research as possible. But were the bulkiest holdings to receive the care commonly devoted to the small ones, the behemoths would preempt the attention and resources of the repository. For handling extensive collections, the allocation of staff and resources must differ from the assignment appropriate for the management of smaller groups, not only in scope, but also in nature. Collecting voluminous records forces adjustments in the cataloging process too. The materials cataloged, the timing of the operation, and the depth of the work cannot be analogous for large as for small groups simply because the limits of both time and staff will not permit it. Nor is the type and degree of reference service unaffected. Basically, meeting the challenge of the massive collection is a matter of ordering priorities, and the formulation of a clear policy for the management of these mammoths is imperative before a repository is committed to their pursuit.

The cardinal rule in dealing with massive collections is *don't panic*. If suddenly inundated by tens or hundreds of linear feet of materials, an archivist should not let the sheer bulk frighten him into impotence, or overwhelm him into dropping everything in a frantic attempt to cope with the flood. It cannot be stressed enough that large collections

---

Ms. Lucas is Assistant Curator of Manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society. This paper is adapted from remarks prepared for delivery at the Midwest Archives Conference annual meeting, 1974.

must find their place within a larger structure of priorities, and cannot be allowed to distort these priorities to serve their own needs. These collections can be controlled rather quickly, and with an investment of staff time that is comparatively modest when balanced against the benefits of knowing the contents and location of all material in the repository.

The acquisition and accessioning of a massive collection is only the beginning of a repository's relationship with the material. Yet the controls established during the accessioning process can determine whether this relationship will prove rewarding or frustrating, whether it will foster a sense of respect and affection for the collection, or generate despair and resentment among the staff, whether large collections in general will be assets to the institution's total holdings, or debilitating drains on staff time and skills, on space, supplies, and administrative energy.

The first step in managing a massive collection is establishing basic bibliographic control over it, and doing so *immediately* upon its receipt. Basic bibliographic control is a record of the contents and location of each box. Tailored to the type of collection involved, to its physical and organizational condition, and to the repository's own administrative structure and staff resources, eight means of obtaining this information are open to the archivist.

1. Obtain copies of box lists, records lists, indexes, or file keys prepared by the donor's office. If the files are in good order, the donor's box list can serve as a preliminary finding aid. Moreover, file keys, indexes, and other lists can provide a framework for subsequent processing. Keep a record of the type and inclusive dates of records known to have been retained or discarded by the donor.

2. If logistics permit, box, label, and list the materials *in situ* before transferring them to the repository. In this way, categories of unwanted materials can be eliminated at the outset, file series and physical relationships can be preserved intact, and lists or summaries of box contents can be prepared as part of the packing process. Thus, an orderly and progressive transfer can be arranged, and the materials can be shelved directly upon receipt. If this must be done after the materials

arrive, however, it need not inhibit effective control procedures.

3. Pack all materials in standard-sized records storage boxes. This simplifies shelving and retrieval and makes possible an accurate estimate of the collection's size. If the records were shipped in standard records storage boxes and arrived in good condition, there should be no occasion at this stage to rebox them.

4. Identify and reconstruct, if time permits, readily distinguishable series or record types. Examine the file lists (if any), as well as both the outside and inside of the original packing boxes, for clues. Once the structured and obvious portions of a collection are recognized, the remainder becomes much less formidable.

5. Unstructured, disorganized, and poorly identified materials can be grouped according to whatever logic comes immediately to mind, but otherwise boxed as is. One must guard against getting bogged down in an attempt to arrange and identify this miscellany and correlate it definitively with the rest of the collection. On the other hand, one cannot foreswear attempting to make sense of the material. Control is impossible without knowing what the papers are, even if on so simplistic a level as "family correspondence, 1930s-1950s" or "background and reference materials."

6. Prepare a box list, unless the papers were accompanied by a useable one, in only enough detail to give an adequate idea of the contents of each box. For structured collections, the list need record merely inclusive contents and approximate dates (i.e., Box 1. Legislative Files, 1970. Box 2. Constituent Correspondence, 1970). Or it can be slightly expanded to bring out a few prominent files (i.e., Box 6. Subject Files, A-D, 1971, including separate folders for Associated Milk Producers, Cooperative League of America, District Organization). More varied contents can be summarized by subseries or types of documents (i.e., Box 11. Annual Reports, 1965-1970; newspaper clippings, 1967-1970; reports from midwest co-ops, 1966-1971). Truly miscellaneous boxes of

material might require lists of folder titles or groups of related materials. Listing should not be made into an elaborate production; the accessioner many times can merely sit down among the papers with a typewriter and prepare the list directly from the boxes.

7. As box lists are made, prepare temporary labels for the boxes, including collection title, box number, and accession number or other control reference. Thereafter, the boxes may be shelved.

8. A brief narrative introduction to the collection, indicating type of papers and their condition will help refresh the archivist's memory later when assigning cataloging projects or answering inquiries about the papers.

It is important at this stage to identify all materials as quickly as possible in an expressible, retrievable way. Matters of consolidation, arrangement, and exact identification can be dealt with when the collection is processed. It is unwise to do a careless job of this initial inventory on the assumption that the collection soon will be processed, however, for the detailed work may not follow shortly. (Once archivists have a firm grasp on one body of materials, they tend to cast their eyes afield in search of still more papers.) Other priorities intrude, and some collections low on the list might languish among the backlog for years. With good preliminary lists, this delay creates no major problems. Without such lists, anyone needing to handle the collection is, quite literally, blind and helpless.

Establishing even the most cursory controls can require many days if the collection is truly massive. But the alternative, shelving or stacking boxes untouched, should be recognized as constituting a *de facto* decision to leave them unuseable by anyone, even their donor. Moreover, the time spent creating preliminary control records will be more than compensated for in time saved during subsequent servicing and processing of the papers. A preliminary list enables the staff to make necessary retrievals from a collection with a minimum of time. If it is the institution's policy to permit research use of unprocessed papers, many large collections, or at least portions of them, can be fed into the historical equation much sooner than they would otherwise become available. Even if these records are not opened to the public, donors of large political, organizational, and business collections seem to request retrievals of information from their papers more frequently than other donors, and they expect the repository to be able to honor their requests.

Bibliographic control facilitates many cataloging decisions. The overview of a collection's scope, content, and arrangement that the initial container list provides will help the cataloging supervisor plan priorities, judge how much work needs to be done on each collection, to whom it should be assigned, which portions can be skimmed and which need more detailed work. It is much easier for a cataloger to begin restructuring series or grouping related materials by scanning a list than by handling dozens of boxes. An approach that has focused on gaining an overall grasp of the structure and content of a collection also helps guard against the temptation to take refuge from its size in a piecemeal attack, doing meticulous organization and description of rich or unified or easily-grasped portions while the rest remains a mystery.

Cataloging large collections requires a different approach than is appropriate for small ones. Their sheer size means that a unitary finding aid which incorporates the same degree of detail that a small collection enjoys will be unwieldy. And limitations of staff time are especially evident. It is probably never going to be feasible to do the type of cataloging of a large collection that is possible, or appropriate, for a smaller one. Those who have been oriented toward small, rich collections find this fact hard to accept. We tend to feel that we are lowering our standards any time we do less than a thorough, meticulous job of physical care and content analysis. We assure ourselves that this is only "preliminary processing" or "partial processing"; we call our finding aids "preliminary inventories"; and we plan to do a proper job on the papers some day, all the while suspecting that we never will.

But does the more summary processing that necessity dictates for large collections really need to constitute a lowering of standards or imply a half-done job? All archivists know how rapidly the quantity of twentieth century documentation has swelled, how great a mass of materials remain unassimilated, and how often these papers prove to be of more value in the aggregate than for the content of individual items. Therefore, a deliberate effort to make as much material as possible available as soon as possible, accompanied by the basic information necessary for its use, would seem best calculated to serve the needs of the majority of those who want to use such papers. A processing approach oriented toward meeting this priority constitutes not a lowering, but a redefinition, of standards to arrive at those which are appropriate for massive collections.

With this philosophy, processing basically can constitute an expansion and refinement of the concept represented by the initial container list--maximum accessibility as against maximum analysis. A brief narrative introduction to the collection, a box or series list, summary statements on series contents, and folder lists provide an overview of the collection that a user can scan quickly and easily to form a preliminary judgment on the value of the collection to his research.

Once the container list is made, it can be supplemented as a finding aid with the addition of progressively more specific levels of detail--notes, special lists, folder content summaries, and citations to specific items for appropriate series or files, depending on the character of the papers, their complexity, available staff time, research demand, and the cataloger's assessment of content value. A "building blocks" approach of this sort aims at providing the researcher with reference tools that are simple and uncluttered, that describe the collection in identifiable units, and that give him ready access to information about the portions he is interested in, without burdening him with a mass of irrelevant detail. The distinctive physical and bibliographic characteristics of large collections influence their processing in ways that often permit a great deal of flexibility and a wide range of options, even while forcing evaluation of some procedures formerly thought sacrosanct. Such collections lend themselves particularly well to divisions of labor or variations in procedure that allow a maximum of staff time and professional expertise to be concentrated on those portions that need most attention or warrant deepest analysis.

The larger a collection, the more structured it tends to be, and therefore the more obvious the arrangement of its essential components. The office or organization that generates a substantial quantity of papers has to keep the material in some semblance of order if it expects to make use of the data. Even records in considerable disarray will have folder titles, similar labels for related files, similar contents for various parts of a series, annotations of file location, or other clues that will help verify or recreate at least a basic structure. The more structured a collection, the easier it is to prepare a hierarchical finding aid, focused on identifiable segments, which can then be expanded or contracted at will.

Many such collections consist in large part of materials whose research value is relatively low in relation to their bulk (such as financial records or constituent correspondence), or which are unitary or sequential in character (such as working papers, minutes, monthly or annual reports). Their processing is largely manual or repetitious, and, without risking either harm to the collection's physical integrity or loss in content analysis, usually can be done by clerks or beginners with a minimum of supervision. Skilled, experienced staff members are freed to direct their expertise toward richer, more heterogeneous, or more disorganized units.

Massive collections dictate an altered approach to weeding and discarding. Their physical bulk alone makes obvious the fact that everything cannot be saved. Archivists must be prepared to make painful judgments. The space, time, and supplies required to process and store the materials must be weighed quite coldly and knowledgeably against the variety and the likelihood of their potential use. On a large scale, weeding must be based on entire series or types of materials, rather than on particular items. The fewer the number of anticipated rejects in a particular file, the harder it is to justify spending time searching for them.

The same holds true for internal arrangement within folders or files in a structured series. The time spent in meticulous sorting of individual items, in a context where precise order is not essential to their usefulness (such as routine correspondence), might better be employed elsewhere.

Acquisition of large collections has forced many institutions to reevaluate the utility and necessity of housing all papers in acid-free folders and boxes. Their price, multiplied by hundreds or even thousands of linear feet, is more than all but the most lavish budget can withstand. Most institutions which choose to collect on a massive scale will at some point confront the harsh necessity of resorting to corregated boxes for permanent storage, and of retaining the original folders whenever they are in good condition. The choice seems less painful if the alternative dictates that the collection remains unprocessed or even uncollected.

The problems of size and scale that influence the processing of massive collections will also alter, and to some degree hamper, their use in the reading room. Their sheer size, combined with the fact that many are used in the aggregate, means that the mechanics of retrieval and reshelving become a major factor in allocating staff time to their management. Even hierarchical finding aids with concise summary data can confront researchers with a substantial body of reading matter before they ever see the papers themselves. Since the lists have the potential of containing much more data than can readily be brought out in a card catalog or other indexing tool, and since the papers in turn contain much more material than can ever be fully reflected in a container list, the researcher has to approach a massive collection with a firmer grasp of what he wants and where he might find it than he would expect to need in a simpler, smaller world. The same problem, of course, faces the reference staff which must answer mail inquiries or guide researchers in the use of the collections.

Computerization holds the promise of alleviating these difficulties by permitting quick retrieval of specific data on box or folder contents from as large a data base as processing time can provide. The costs of obtaining the hardware and of hiring or developing the necessary expertise, however, still remain prohibitive for most repositories. The best interim measure may be to formulate finding aids from which information eventually can be fed into an automated system with a minimum of restructuring.

Acquisition of massive collections demands a commitment from a repository to fit the mammoths into an overall scheme of institutional priorities. Moreover, the institution must cultivate a psychological and philosophical attitude that permits it to approach them realistically. Coping with large collections is indeed one of the major challenges facing the modern archivist, and like any other challenge, is rewarding only when successfully mastered.